



## ROYALL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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*Home of the Panthers*

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Testimony before the Rural School Task Force  
Royall School District  
Elroy, Wisconsin  
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Good afternoon, my name is Mark Gruen, as most of you know, from taking the tour with us earlier; I am the District Administrator for the Royall School District. Thank you for allowing me to testify today and thank you to my colleagues who have testified before me and will testify after me. As I begin my testimony, I would like to bring your attention to an editorial from the "La Crosse Tribune Editorial Board" dated January, 2013 where they call for a more "fair" tax system. I would also bring your attention to an article in the "Wisconsin Taxpayer" in June/July 2011 Volume 79 No. 6/7 put out by the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. There have been many, many articles like these two that could be brought to your attention. The issues of rural schools are not new; they are real and will continue to get worse if something is not done.

This is my 4<sup>th</sup> year at Royall. This is my 18<sup>th</sup> year in administration. I was a full time Athletic Director at La Crosse Logan for 5 years, an elementary principal in Onalaska for 4 years, a MS/HS principal in Eleva-Strum for 3 years and then spent 2 years as the District Administrator there before coming to Royall in 2010. I also taught elementary and middle school in the Verona School District at the start of my career. I give you my background so you know I have worked in a number of different districts with very different socio economic status - large suburban, large city, and rural. Each district that I have worked in had its own unique issues and its own unique talents. Each one of them was full of hard working, committed, passionate professionals that were focused on student achievement while balancing the importance of developing contributing citizens. I am proud to have worked in each of these districts, as I made many friends throughout my career.

There are many issues facing our schools across the state. Today, I want to briefly present one of the unique challenges of the rural school districts. I will start by giving you a brief synopsis of where the Royall School District has been. In 2000, after a couple of years of neighbor vs. neighbor type of turmoil, the Wilton community detached from the Royall School District. The root of the turmoil was shrinking enrollment and money, which led to the discussion of closing schools. As the school board and administration dealt with the necessary and severe cuts, they decided that one of the cuts was to go to a part time superintendent. This marked the beginning of a tailspin that we have only now been able to stop - with no guarantee that we have stopped it for good! Our enrollment went down for 10 + years in a row - our aid obviously followed.

When I started in 2010, the Royall School Board made a conscious decision that they needed to do something. The district had depleted its fund balance to approximately \$200,000 by taking \$200,000 and \$400,000 out of it in the 2008 and 2009. They decided that if hiring a full time District Administrator did not solve the many, many issues the district was facing; then maybe it was time to close the doors. Well – we have not closed them yet. I do think that our story is a severe case – however, I am sure that we are not alone in our constant struggles.

We have two principals in our district of 600 students. On the surface, this would seem manageable with a 300 to 1 ratio. The difference is that our principals, like all rural administrators, are asked to wear many, many hats. At Royall our elementary/intermediate principal is our District Assessment Coordinator, our Title One coordinator and our Summer School Coordinator. Our MS/HS principal is our on-site Summer School Principal, our Booster Club Liaison and our Head Boys Basketball Coach. Together the three of us are the Curriculum Coordinator team, the Safety Coordinator team, the Transportation team, and the After School Activities Coordinators, not to mention our focus on Teacher Effectiveness, SLO's, RTI, PLC, PBIS, Pride Time, Tier Time, Common Planning Time, WKCE's, ACT's, etc... etc... and much, much, more. In the past three years I have personally worked 589 nights and over 3000 hours of "extra" time. I have met the cement truck 26 times and cleaned up more than my share of vomit. I give you these examples because I am not unlike many of my rural school administrative colleagues and teachers. When I come in early or on the weekend or stay late at night – it is seldom alone as one or more of our staff members always seem be here putting in extra time for our students. I could give you literally dozens of examples. It is the same in all rural school districts across the state as we ask our limited numbers to continue to do more and more.

Our small rural schools are in many cases the starting grounds for new teachers. New teachers are great, and the energy and passion that they bring can be contagious, however, it is well known fact that new teachers take more "leadership and training" than veterans. I would make the case that administrators in rural schools are stretched further by this fact alone, not to mention that there are many annual requests for letters of recommendation from our staff members as they look to leave for higher salaries. To this point, I would testify that we are using reverse capitalism when it comes to recruiting the "best and the brightest" to work in the rural school districts. Hold on now, because this is where I may come across a little bit radical and I am going to be careful not to alienate my colleagues in the larger schools. My example is this – If a student graduates High School from Kimberly and then graduates college from UW – La Crosse – then interviews and is offered two teaching jobs in the same week, one from Madison and one from Weston, which one do you think they are going to take? Time and time again, I have used this example with different city vs. rural schools, and every time the student chooses the larger city. It is pretty normal for a student to want to be in the night life and action packed city. However, as a reward for that decision, we also give them a higher salary, and promise that if they stay in the city schools the gap will increase. Hence, my term of reverse capitalism!

Now, many of you are thinking that it costs less to live in rural Wisconsin than in the city or a suburb, I would debate this also. When I moved to Elroy from La Crosse my insurance went up, my grocery bill went up, my heat and electricity went up, literally every living expense that I have went up.

One example that has been used in the cost of living debate is housing – which for many, many years was really looked at as investment. On that note, my wife and I built a new house and I did NOT get a rural area discount by anyone involved. One could make the case that there is less competition which actually drives the prices up. Certainly in order to make a profit and stay in business, our rural businesses have to charge more for the materials as they are unable to compete with the large corporations. So... it probably cost me more to build a house in a rural area – that like a new car, is already worth about 75% of what I paid for it if I would attempt to sell it. Actually, getting 75% would be very lucky!

I will give you one more real life example. I have four children in the Royall School District, Emma is 11, Bryce is 10, Marah is 8, and Bria is 5. My children are occasionally invited to a birthday party. In the hustle and bustle of our normal parenting lives, many times these invites come out on Monday for a Friday party. So, we are in need of a gift for the birthday party and we have four evenings to purchase it. In rural Wisconsin there are seldom “children gifts” available in town, which results in additional travel, time and obviously adds to the expense.

I have researched and found that rural medical workers make the same as their colleagues in the cities and suburbs, our state employees that work in our prison systems are paid the same for comparable positions and experience no matter where they live, our public attorneys – are paid the same across the state. Yet, we allow there to be a huge disparity across the state with regard to public educator’s compensation. Royall staff members are currently paid in the bottom 7% of the state for salary – and bottom 8% in the state for benefits. The Federal eligibility income chart shows that in a household of 4 you will receive free and/or reduced lunch if you make less than \$43,568. At Royall, you need to have your Master’s Degree and have taught 8 years to make that amount of money. Actually, when we revamped the salary schedule two years ago, we did not give our teachers one year for one year, so the true number of years is closer to 13. Our school board is struggling to give the cost of living raises that our employees deserve. They are not struggling because they think our teachers do not deserve the raise, but because they are worried about making ends meet – worried about having to go to referendum to keep our buildings and grounds presentable and operable.

In most districts across the state, school boards and administrative teams are looking at compensation right now. My proposal is for a more equitable state wide salary schedule for our professional staff members – I do NOT think that a teacher in OshKosh should make more than a teacher in Ithaca if they have the same credentials and the same experience level. I would propose standardizing personnel salaries and taking that money out of the aid formula. I would also be willing to work with a committee of professionals to accomplish this task. This would be a huge step toward a true free and **equal** public education in the state of Wisconsin.

Thanks for listening.

Mark Gruen

*Achieving Excellence Together... Whatever It Takes!*